

HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL EXCURSIONS IN OPERALAND

Saint-Saens's Opera

"Samson et Dalila"

Operatic History of the Son of Manoah—Disappointments of Rameau, Duprez and Raff—Vicissitudes of Saint-Saens's Opera—The Hero in Comparative Mythology.

By H. E. KREHBIEL.

Copyright, 1916.

THERE are but two musical works based on the story of Samson on the current list to-day, Handel's oratorio and Saint-Saens's opera; but the lyric drama was still in its infancy when the subject first took hold of the fancy of composers and it has held it ever since. The earliest works were of the kind called sacred operas in the books and are spoken of as oratorios now, though they were doubtless performed with scenery and costumes and with action of a sort. Such were "Il Sansone" by Giovanni Paolo Colonna (Bologna, 1677), "Sansone accettato da Filistini" by Francesco Antonio Uri (Venice, about 1700), "Simson" by Christoph Graupner (Hamburg, 1709), "Simson" by Georg von Pasterwitz (about 1770), "Samson" by J. N. A. Leofrid Mereraux (Paris, 1774), "Simson" by Johann Heinrich Rolle (about 1790), "Simson" by Franz Tucek (Vienna, 1804), and "Il Sansone" by Francesco Basili (Naples, 1824). Two French operas are associated with great names and have interesting histories. Voltaire wrote a dramatic text on the subject at the request of La Popelinière, the farmer general, who, as poet, musician and artist, exercised a tremendous influence in his day. Rameau was in his service as household clavierist and set Voltaire's poem. The authors looked forward to a production on the stage of the Grand Opéra, where at least two Biblical operas, an Old Testament "Jephthe" and a New Testament "Enfant prodigue" were current; but Rameau had powerful enemies, and the opera was prohibited on the eve of the day on which it was to have been performed. The composer had to stomach his mortification as best he could; he put some of his Hebrew music into the service of his Persian "Zoroastre."

The other French Samson to whom I have referred had also to undergo a sea-change like unto Rameau's, Rossini's *Moses* and Verdi's *Nebuchadnezzar*. Duprez, who was ambitious to shine as a composer as well as a singer (he wrote no less than eight operas and also an oratorio, "The Last Judgment"), tried his hand on a Samson opera and succeeded in enlisting the help of Dumas the elder in writing the libretto. When he was ready to present it at the door of the Grand Opéra the Minister of Fine Arts told him that it was impracticable as the stage setting of the last act alone would cost more than 100,000 francs. Duprez then followed the example set by Rossini's "Moses" in London and changed the book to make it tell a story of the crusades which he called "Zephora." Nevertheless the original form was restored in German and Italian translations of the work, and it had concert performances in 1757. To Joachim Raff was denied even this poor comfort. He wrote a German "Simson" between 1851 and 1857. The conductor at Darmstadt to whom it was first submitted rejected it on the ground that it was too difficult for his singers. Raff then gave it to Liszt, with whom he was sojourning at Weimar, and who had taken pity on his "König Alfred"; but the tenor singer at the Weimar opera said the music was too high. Long afterward Wagner's friend, Schnorr von Carolsfeld, saw the score in the hands of the composer. The heroic stature of the hero delighted him, and his praise moved Raff to revise the opera; but before this had been done Schnorr died of the cold contracted while creating the role of Wagner's *Tristan* at Munich in 1865. Thus mournfully ended the third episode. As late as 1882 Raff spoke of taking the opera in hand again, but though he may have done so his death found the work unperformed and it has not yet seen the light of the stage-lamps.

Composition of Saint-Saens's Opera.

Saint-Saens's opera has also passed through many vicissitudes, but has succeeded to none and is probably possessed of more vigorous life now than it ever had. It is the recognized operatic masterpiece of the most successful and fecund French musician since Berlioz. Saint-Saens began the composition of "Samson et Dalila" in 1880. The author of the book, Ferdinand Lemaire, was a cousin of the composer. Before the breaking out of the Franco-Prussian War the score was so far on the way to completion that it was possible to give its second act a private trial. This was done, an incident of the occasion which afterward introduced one element of pathos in its history—being the singing of the part of Samson by the painter Henri Regnault, who soon after lost his life in the service of his country. A memorial to him and the friendship which existed between him and the composer is the "Marche Héroïque," which bears the dead man's name on its title page. Toward the end of 1872 the opera was finished. For two years the score rested in the composer's desk. Then the second act was again brought forth for trial, this time at the country home of Mme. Viardot, at Croissy, the illustrious hostess singing part of *Dalila*. In 1875 the first act was performed in concert style by M. Edouard Colonne in Paris. Liszt interested himself in the opera and secured its acceptance at the Grand Ducal Opera House of Weimar, where Eduard Lassen brought it out on December 2, 1877. Brussels heard it in 1878; but it did not reach one of the theatres of France until March 3, 1880, when Rouen produced it at its Théâtres des Arts under the direction of M. Henri Verdurt. It took nearly seven months more to reach Paris, where the first representation was at the Eden Theatre on October 31 of the same year. Two years later, after it had been heard in a number of French and Italian provincial theatres, it was given at the Académie Nationale de Musique under the direction of M. Colonne. The part of *Dalila* was taken by Mme. Deschamps-Jehin, that of Samson by M. Vergnet, that of the *High Priest* by M. Lassalle. Eight months before it had been performed as an oratorio by the Oratorio Society of New York. There were two performances,

on March 25 and 26, 1892, the conductor being Mr. Walter Damrosch and the principal singers being Frau Marie Ritter-Gotze, Sebastian Montariol, H. E. Distelhurst, Homer Moore, Emil Fischer and Pardon Robinson. London had heard the work twice as an oratorio before it had a stage representation there on April 26, 1909, but this performance was fourteen years later than the first at the Metropolitan Opera House on February 8, 1895. The New York performance was scenically inadequate, but the integrity of the record demands that the cast be given here: Samson, Signor Tamagno; *Dalila*, Mme. Mantelli; *High Priest*, Signor Campanari; *Abimelech* and *An Old Hebrew*, M. Plançon; *First Philistine*, Signor Rinaldini; *Second Philistine*, Signor de Vachetti; conductor, Signor Mancinelli. The Metropolitan management did not venture upon a repetition until the opening night of the season 1915-16, when its success was such that it became an active factor in the repertoire of the establishment; but by that time it had been made fairly familiar to the New York public by performances at the Manhattan Opera House under the management of Mr. Oscar Hammerstein, the first of which took place on November 13, 1908. Signor Campanini conducted and the cast embraced Mme. Gerville-Réache as *Dalila*, Charles Dalme as Samson and M. Dufour as *High Priest*. The cast at the Metropolitan Opera House's revival of the opera on November 15, 1915, was as follows: *Dalila*, Mme. Margarete Matzenauer; Samson, Signor Enrico Caruso; *High Priest*, Signor Pasquale Amato; *Abimelech*, Herr Carl Schlegel; *An Old Hebrew*, M. Leon Rothier; *A Philistine Messenger*, Herr Max Bloch; *First Philistine*, Pietro Audisio; *Second Philistine*, Vincenzo Reschigliani; conductor, Signor Polacco.

Samson and Hercules—A Parallel.

It would be a curious inquiry to try to determine the source of the fascination which the story of Manoah's son has exerted upon mankind for centuries. It bears a likeness to the story of the son of Zeus and Alcmena, and there are few books on mythology which do not draw a parallel between the two heroes. Samson's story is singularly brief. For twenty years he "judged Israel," but the Biblical his-

tory which deals with him consists only of an account of his birth, recitals of the incidents in which he displayed his prodigious strength and valor, the tale of his amours, and, at the end, his tragic destruction, brought about by the weak element in his character. Commentators have been sorely perplexed by the tale, irrespective of the adornments which it has received at the hands of the Talmudists. Is Samson a Hebrew form of the conception personified by the Greek Herakles? Is he a mythical creature, born in the human imagination of primitive nature worship—a variant of the Tyrian sun-god Shemesh, whose name his so curiously resembles? (In Hebrew he is called *Shimshon*, and the sun *shemesh*.) Was he something more than a man of extraordinary physical strength and extraordinary moral weakness, whose patriotic virtues and pathetic end have kept his memory alive through the ages? Have a hundred generations of men to whom the story of Herakles has appeared to be only a fanciful romance, the product of that imagination heightened by religion which led the Greeks to exalt their supreme heroes to the extent of deification, persisted in hearing and telling the story of Samson with a sympathetic interest which betrays at least a sub-conscious belief in its verity? Is the story only a parable enforcing a moral lesson which is as old as humanity? If so, how got it into the canonical Book of Judges, which, with all its mythical and legendary material, seems yet to contain a large substratum of unquestionable history?

There was nothing of the divine essence in Samson as the Hebrews conceived him, except that spirit of God with which he was directly endowed in supreme crises. There is little evidence of his possession of great wisdom, but strong proof of his moral and religious laxity. He sinned against the laws of Israel's God when he took a Philistine woman, an idolater, to wife; he sinned against the moral law when he visited the harlot at Gaza. He was weakly weak in character when he yielded to the blandishments of Delilah and wrought his own undoing, as well as that of his people. The disgraceful slavery into which Herakles fell was not caused by the hero's incontinence or uxoriousness, but a punishment for crime, in that he had in a fit of mad-

MELANIE KURT.

Rabbinical legends have magnified his stature and power in precisely the same manner as the imagination of the poet of the "Lay of the Nibelung" magnified the stature and strength of Siegfried. His shoulders, says the legend, were sixty ells broad; although he was lame in both feet, when the Spirit of God came on him he could step from Zorah to Eshtal; the hairs of his head arose and clashed against one another so that they could be heard for a like distance; he was so strong that he could uplift two mountains and rub them together like two clouds of earth. Herakles tore asunder the mountain which, divided, now forms the Straits of Gibraltar and Gates of Hercules. The parallel which is frequently drawn between Samson and Herakles cannot be pursued far with advantage to the Hebrew hero. Samson rent a young lion on the road to Timnath, whither he was going to take his Philistine wife; Herakles, while still a youthful herdsman, slew the Theban lion and afterward strangled the Nemean lion with his hands. Samson carried off the gates of Gaza and bore them to the top of a hill before He-

CARUSO AS SAMSON AT THE MILL IN "SAMSON ET DALILA."

Photo by White Studio.



CAMILLE SAINT-SEANS.
Composer of "Samson et Dalila."

ness killed his friend Iphitus. And the three years which he spent as the slave of Omphale were punctuated by larger and better deeds than those of Samson in like situation—bursting the new cords with which the men of Judah had bound him and the green withes and new ropes with which he sinned against the moral law when he visited the harlot at Gaza. He was weakly weak in character when he yielded to the blandishments of Delilah and wrought his own undoing, as well as that of his people. The disgraceful slavery into which Herakles fell was not caused by the hero's incontinence or uxoriousness, but a punishment for crime, in that he had in a fit of mad-

ness killed his friend Iphitus. And the three years which he spent as the slave of Omphale were punctuated by larger and better deeds than those of Samson in like situation—bursting the new cords with which the men of Judah had bound him and the green withes and new ropes with which he sinned against the moral law when he visited the harlot at Gaza. He was weakly weak in character when he yielded to the blandishments of Delilah and wrought his own undoing, as well as that of his people. The disgraceful slavery into which Herakles fell was not caused by the hero's incontinence or uxoriousness, but a punishment for crime, in that he had in a fit of mad-

ness killed his friend Iphitus. And the three years which he spent as the slave of Omphale were punctuated by larger and better deeds than those of Samson in like situation—bursting the new cords with which the men of Judah had bound him and the green withes and new ropes with which he sinned against the moral law when he visited the harlot at Gaza. He was weakly weak in character when he yielded to the blandishments of Delilah and wrought his own undoing, as well as that of his people. The disgraceful slavery into which Herakles fell was not caused by the hero's incontinence or uxoriousness, but a punishment for crime, in that he had in a fit of mad-

The Temple of Dagon at the Metropolitan Opera House.
Photo by White Studio.

more natural, by pairing with that amiable weakness, susceptibility to woman's charms.

After all Samson is a true type of the tragic hero, whatever Dr. Chrysander or another may say. He is impelled by Fate into a commission of the follies which bring about the wreck of his body. His marriage with the Philistine woman in Timnath was part of a divine plot, though unpatriotic and seemingly impious. When his father said unto him: "Is there never a woman among the daughters of thy brethren or among all my people that thou goest to take a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines?" And Samson said unto his father: "Get her for me; for she pleaseth me well." The father did not know that "it was of the Lord that he sought an occasion against the Philistines." Out of that woe and winning grew the first of the encounters which culminated in the destruction of the temple of Dagon, when "the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life." So his yielding to the pleadings of his wife when she betrayed the answer to his riddle and his succumbing to the wheedling arts of Delilah when he betrayed the secret of his strength—acts incompatible with the character of an ordinary strong and wise man—were of the type essential

to the machinery of the Greek drama. A word about the mythological interpretation of the characters which have been placed in parallel: It may be helpful to an understanding of the Hellenic mind to conceive Herakles as a marvellously strong man, first glorified into a national hero and finally deified. So, too, the theory that Herakles sinking down upon his couch of fire is but a symbol of the declining sun can be entertained without marring the grandeur of the hero or belittling Nature's phenomenon; but it would obscure our understanding of the Hebrew intellect and profane the Hebrew religion to conceive Samson as anything but the man that the Bible says he was; while to make of him, as Ignaz Goldziher suggests, a symbol of the setting sun whose curly locks (*crines Phœbi*) are sheared by Delilah-Night, would bring contempt upon one of the most beautiful and impressive of Nature's spectacles. Before the days of comparative mythology scholars were not troubled by such interpretations. Josephus disposes of the Delilah episode curtly: "As for Samson being enamored by a woman that is to be ascribed to human nature, which is too weak to resist sin."

A second article, telling the history of and analyzing Saint-Saens's opera will appear in next Sunday's Tribune.

THE FIRST MUSIC TO GOETHE'S "ERLKING."



Music News and Notes of the Week

According to a telegram recently received by the Metropolitan Musical Bureau from Serge de Diaghileff members of his Ballet Russe, together with the scenery and costumes for the ballets, will leave Gibraltar on September 7 on the steamship Cretic. A second group of dancers will leave Bordeaux on the steamship Lafayette on September 9. They will arrive in time to rehearse three weeks for the New York season, beginning October 9, at the Manhattan Opera House.

Margarete Matzenauer was soloist Friday evening at the fourteenth of the series of summer concerts being given by the Civic Orchestral Society at Madison Square Garden. Mme. Matzenauer is the second Metropolitan opera star to appear at these concerts, the first being Mme. Gadski. Mr. Rothwell, the conductor, had arranged an attractive programme, including Tchaikovsky's "Symphonie Pathétique," and the audience, a large one, showed its appreciation of both soloist and programme by sincere and enthusiastic applause. The programme follows:

Overture, "Rienzi"..... Wagner
Symphony No. 4, in D minor, "Pathétique" Op. 113 (by request)..... Tchaikovsky
Aria from Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde"..... Wagner
Mme. Matzenauer..... Soloist
Overture, "William Tell"..... Rossini
Aria from Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde"..... Wagner
Mme. Matzenauer..... Soloist
Waltz, "Du und Ich"..... Strauss

Melanie Kurt, the dramatic soprano of the Metropolitan Opera Company, will leave her summer home at Norfolk, Conn., to come to New York to be the soloist at the concert next Tuesday evening, August 29.

Mme. Kurt was a leading member of the Berlin Royal Opera Company, the Champs Elysées, Paris; Covent Garden, London, and came to the Metropolitan Opera Company two years ago to sing the leading dramatic roles. Among these her greatest successes have been Isolde, Brunnhilde, Kundry and others. Mme. Kurt will sing "Senta's Ballad," from Wagner's "The Flying Dutchman," and "Isolde's Love Death," from "Tristan and Isolde." The programme follows:

Overture, "Rienzi"..... Wagner
Symphony No. 4, in D minor, "Pathétique" Op. 113 (by request)..... Tchaikovsky
Aria from Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde"..... Wagner
Mme. Kurt..... Soloist
Overture, "William Tell"..... Rossini
Aria from Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde"..... Wagner
Mme. Kurt..... Soloist
Waltz, "Du und Ich"..... Strauss

At the next meeting of Le Salon Thursday evening, August 31, at the Martha Washington Hotel, the soloists will be Miss Helen Helms, violinist, and Mme. Bianco, soprano. Miss Margaret Summer will give impersonations.

Charles Wakefield Cadman, the Western composer, whose Indian songs and piano music have been known here for several years, and Princess Tsarina, a Creek-Cherokee Indian singer, will give a joint recital known as an "Indian Music-Talk," at Aeolian Hall on October 17.

Rubinstein, the pianist, who has been summing in the White Mountains, returned yesterday to begin an engagement as soloist with Arthur Pryor, at the Asbury Park Arcade.

Centenary of "The Erlking"

The First Setting of a Poem by One of Goethe's Sweethearts.

A writer in the August number of "The Musical Times" of London takes advantage of the fact that Schubert's setting of Goethe's poem, "The Erlking," was composed at the end of 1815 or in the first days of 1816 to print an article on the music which the poem has called forth. The most interesting of the writer's contribution to the history of the song is the fact that it received its first setting from Corona Schröter. "Goethe made her acquaintance," says the writer, "in 1766, and, owing, no doubt, to his influence, she became, ten years later, chamber singer to the Dowager Duchess of Weimar. For a performance of Goethe's 'Die Fischerin' in 1782 she wrote music for the poems introduced and sang them; among them was the 'Erlking.' There are several reasons why Corona Schröter deserves more attention than the English writer bestowed upon her. She was one of the women whom Goethe loved. A portrait of herself which she painted (she was talented in several directions besides music) hangs to-day in the Grand Ducal Library at Weimar. She gave it to Goethe as a souvenir of an occasion when she had been made happy by the privilege of appearing with him in one of his plays. Goethe had met her at Leipzig and he brought her to Weimar in 1788. She was then thirty years old, a singer, actress, composer, and in an amateur way a painter. Goethe's great admiration for her found expression in a poem, 'On the Death of Miedling'—an actor. Years ago among the musical letters sent to The Tribune during a musical pilgrimage undertaken by the present writer was one from Weimar devoted to the influence of Goethe and List as exercised at the Grand Ducal Theatre. An attempt was made to put Goethe's tribute to the charming artist into English, with the following result:

More soon, my friends! I will back a little space! See me approach with beating full of grace! 'The Erlking' on whom we've depended. Our prayers are heard, their gift the Muses send! You know her well—the cause of our delight. A woman, fairer than the sun's own light. To be a model she to earth was sent. When the real and ideal should be met. Or all their gifts the Muses withheld no part. And nature breathed in her the breath of art. To lead her charms the world itself to sport. And 'erl' her name, Corona, is an ornament!

It was Johann Samuel Schröter, a brother of Corona, who was Johann Christian Bach's successor as music master to the Queen of England. He married one of his aristocratic pupils, who soon tired of him and purchased a separation. She became a pupil of Haydn when he went to London, in 1791, and formed an attachment for that susceptible old gentleman, which found amusing expression in the love letters which I published in "Music and Manners," in 1808.

Corona Schröter's setting of "The Erlking" was published, together with twenty-four other songs, in 1786. It is strophic in form and decidedly inconsequential. Johann Friedrich Reichardt's music for the poem was considered superior to that of Schubert and Loewe by Mendelssohn, as is attested by a letter written in 1831. Zietzer began a setting of the poem in 1797, but laid it aside when he saw Reichardt's. Anselm Hüttenbrenner, the intimate friend of Schubert, who had his arm under Beethoven's head when he died, is also among the very many composers who have set "The Erlking" to music.

Soloist at Civic Orchestral Concert next Tuesday evening.
Photo by Ira L. Hull.